

Article

Black Religion and Reparations: Pragmatic Trajectories and Widening Support

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Abstract: This article examines reparations advocacy by a vanguard of African American faith leader proponents, from Bishop Henry McNeil Turner's late-19th century demands for federal payments toward emigrationism and Black Atlantic linkages, to 21st century Black clergy involvements in national level, local level, and sector-specific reparations policy activism. Attention is paid to evolving theoretical and operational framings of this reparations advocacy and to variances in levels of American religious and political receptivity to reparations proposals. The conclusion drawn from available evidence here is that reparations advocacy by Black religious leaders has proven more pragmatic than purist, as concerns increasingly have shifted toward maximizing public support and prospects for reparations deliverables.

Keywords: reparations; religion; slavery; race; mainline Christianity; black religious nationalism; evangelicals; public policy; H.R. 40

1. Introduction

Since the mid-1800s, a vanguard of African American religious leaders has emphasized the economic underpinnings of Black oppression and persistent racial inequities. Abolitionist and AME Zion lay minister Frederick Douglass spoke in 1856, for example, of “the dreaded effects” of accumulated wealth “in the hands of a few—creating an aristocracy of wealth, ready to be the tool of an aggressive tyranny”. Douglass forcefully condemned an “unlimited hoarding of wealth, and monopolies of land, which has converted almost the entire civilized world into an abode of millionaires and beggars; which renders the enslavement of the peoples of the world possible” (Douglass 1856). Concerns over race-based economic disparities were made equally explicit by early-20th century pastor Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. (whose son succeeded him as pastor of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church and then represented Harlem in the U.S. Congress). In a 1932 publication titled “The Attitude of Jesus Toward World Problems”, Powell, Sr. criticized “Corporations or individuals who amass wealth solely for the sake of comfort and luxury [while neglecting] the needs of Society”. He called for “a more equal distribution of wealth if we are going to stave off an economic world revolution” (Powell 1932). Thirty-five years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. outlined another revolution of sorts, indicating poverty could not be adequately addressed “through a little change here and little change there” but would require instead “a reconstruction of the whole society, a revolution of values . . . [and] a radical redistribution of power” (King 2005).

King was also numbered among the subset of Black religious leaders who embraced the idea of redistribution in concrete and not simply philosophical terms, assigning financial amounts to Black social injury, disadvantage, and loss caused by racially unjust American systems and structures. The analysis here examines important instances of Black clergy reparations advocacy, from Bishop Henry McNeil Turner's late-19th century demands for federal payments toward emigrationism and Black Atlantic linkages, to 21st century Black clergy involvements in national level, local level, and sector-specific reparations policy activism.



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Religious leaders have tended to rely strongly on moral and spiritual claims in their pronouncements on human affairs and have leaned toward those premises in their reparations advocacy (as outlined below). But while moral imperatives may have seemed obvious to a morally conscious minority on this issue, those imperatives have proven far less compelling for a broader American public. Partly in response to these limitations, Black religious activists became less reliant on moral premises in their reparations advocacy and turned toward a more vigorous and intentional strategizing about ways to overcome intrinsic American resistance to slavery reparations and about how to build broader American coalitions on the issue.

Black religious leaders have approached slavery's harms and culpabilities not only through calculations of its moral costs, (and of its material and human costs), but also in terms of legal liability and responsibility. The parameters of that culpability, as defined within much of the legal argumentation on reparations, are summarized by legal scholar Amy Sepinwall in the following way: "the nation as a whole participated in slavery [and] contemporary citizens bear derivative responsibility for that institution [in the sense that] individuals' acts and attitudes can combine to form genuinely collective harms" (Sepinwall 2006, p. 1). This definition of culpability provides an important legal framing and scope to the reparations argument, but it also fuels a central criticism and source of apathy towards reparations—mainly, claims that persons within the contemporary context could be held accountable for social practices formally abolished in the mid-1800s.

The factual basis of this has been strenuously debated, with arguments in support of contemporary accountability premised on the cross-generational benefits of slavery that have accrued to White people and the cross-generational injuries and disadvantages that have accrued to Black people. This has been a common thematic within reparations advocacy. At the same time, there have been criticisms of collective responsibility claims as politically self-defeating and as tending to undermine prospects for genuine repair. Adolph Reed, Jr. outlines difficulties of this approach as follows:

How can you imagine putting together a coalition that can prevail on reparations, especially in the political climate of the United States since 1981? . . . How can you expect people who wouldn't get anything from this to sacrifice for it? Unless it's something that's purely symbolic. And in that case, why wouldn't it make more sense to pursue policy initiatives and programs that actually have a material effect on improving actual people's lives in the here and now?

Certainly, a conundrum for the reparations cause from the outset has been determining a basis for motivating a recalcitrant nation to move toward an appropriate accounting of injuries and harms from centuries of slavery. Increasingly cognizant of this, Black religious leaders' more recent reparations advocacy has reflected a strong emphasis upon achievability, an emphasis clearly warranted by scant progress within the U.S. on reparations demands across more than a hundred years of reparations advocacy.

This emphasis on achievability within Black reparations advocacy reflects a longstanding African American pragmatism, a praxis defined by early-twentieth century philosopher Alain Locke in terms of "dethroning our absolutes [while taking] care not to exile our imperatives" (Locke 1935, p. 34). Similarly, religion scholar Eddie Glaude, Jr. points to a well-established Black pragmatism that "seeks to avoid dogmas" while focusing instead on the "ability or inability to secure desired aims in a somewhat hostile environment" (Glaude 2007, p. 7).

Located between critics unconvinced of the moral claims and operational proposals of the reparations movement and reparations advocates unwilling to concede moral or operational ground, a Black religious vanguard has contributed key guidance and support to the reparations movement. Black religious leaders' reparations perspectives, promotions, and initiatives are examined here across various historical periods and strategic frameworks and with regard to its content, adaptability to context, and alignments within broader reparations movement advocacy and objectives. Attention is paid as well to evolving theoretical and operational framings of Black religious reparations advocacy, including the metrics

and mechanisms proposed for redistributive frameworks. The conclusion drawn from available evidence here is that reparations advocacy by Black religious leaders has proven more pragmatic than purist, as concerns have shifted increasingly toward realizability of reparations objectives.

2. Heeding the Call for Reparations

Within a late-19th century context when African Americans were positioned to make few demands on an American power structure that had brutally enforced Black enslavement and that was subsequently entrenching systematic racial segregation, AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner promoted two steps toward remedying the racial situation. Firstly, considering what he believed to be the unlikelihood of significant Black social justice or empowerment within turn-of-the-century White supremacist America, Turner advocated collective Black repatriation to Africa. Secondly, he insisted the U.S. government should be the financial underwriter of this collective Black relocation. Writing in an AME periodical in 1900, Turner argued Black people had “worked [and] enriched the country” while continuing to be denied “civil and political rights”, and should view as sensible “the idea of asking for a hundred million dollars to go home”. “Africa is our home”, said Turner, “and is the one place that offers us manhood and freedom”. He stated further: “A hundred million of dollars can be obtained if we, as a race, would ask for it. The way we figure it out, this country owes us forty billions of dollars, and we are afraid to ask for a hundred million” (Turner 1900, p. 123).

Simultaneous with Turner’s reparations efforts were those of another Black clergyman, Isaiah H. Dickerson, an educator who was general manager of the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association of the United States of America. The organization, which was chartered 7 August 1897 and headquartered in Nashville Tennessee, pursued Congressional legislation that would provide pensions to formerly enslaved Black people along with “mutual aid and burial expenses”. Historian Miranda Booker Perry outlines the details of the provisions pursued through the organization’s legislative advocacy:

The organization supported a proposed pension payment scale based upon the age of beneficiaries that appeared in every ex-slave bill from 1899 onward. Ex-slaves 70 years and older at the time of disbursement were to receive an initial payment of \$500 and \$15 a month for the rest of their lives; those aged 60–69 years old would receive \$300 and \$12 a month; those aged 50–59 years old would receive \$100 and \$8 a month; and those under 50 would receive a \$4 a month pension. If formerly enslaved persons were either very old or too ill to care for themselves, their caretakers were to be compensated (Perry 2010).

In a detailed history of this pensions campaign, historian Mary Frances Berry suggests that what contributed to Dickerson’s advocacy was his awareness of how readily available pensions were at the time for Union military veterans, so much so from Dickerson’s viewpoint that “anyone who’s been anyplace near the army could get one for a lifetime”. Consequently, Dickerson believed pensions most certainly were deserved by “the old ex-slaves who worked unpaid all their lives and then helped the Union digging ditches at the forts, washing the soldiers’ clothes, cooking for them and nursing the injured” (quoted in (Berry 2005, p. 44)). Berry also points out the organization’s location in Nashville (as “the black church hub of the South”) was favorable for Dickerson in targeting Black churches as a strategic base of support for the pensions campaign. Over the next twenty years, Dickerson with the considerable aid of the organization’s assistant secretary Callie House (a formerly enslaved person and national promoter of the organization) built a dues-paying membership base of 300,000 persons across various locations, including in Tennessee as well as its affiliate chapters in Atlanta, New Orleans, Vicksburg, Kansas City, and in smaller rural and urban contexts in the South and Midwest. Many were persons seeking aid and relief from the organization, but these were also constituents from which activist leaders could be drawn and whose overall numbers could be leveraged in efforts to influence Congressional legislative action (Berry 2005, pp. 61, 94). Nevertheless, despite multiple

attempts to push legislation on pensions for the formerly enslaved through Congress, those efforts proved unsuccessful. Consequently, the organization's focus shifted more toward litigation, including a 1915 suit against the federal government claiming Black "rights to the funds collected through the controversial 'southern cotton tax'" (Aiyetoro 2003, p. 16).

Turner's and Dickerson's respective formulations on reparations pushed beyond acceptable strategic boundaries and racial analytics within the American political context of their day but also located largely outside realms of consideration for many of their Black Christian contemporaries. Black Christian speculation on reparations, at least through the mid-20th century, were more consistent with the views of Rev. Joseph H. Jackson, the formidable president 1953 to 1982 of the nation's largest Black religious communion, the approximately six million-member National Baptist Convention, USA Inc. (NBCUSA). This was the Baptist body from which Martin Luther King, Sr. and Jr. and many socially progressive pastors split in 1961 to form the Progressive National Baptist Convention, largely in reaction to Jackson's resistance to civil rights protest activities and his reluctances toward transformative social change efforts in-general. Regarding reparations, for example, Jackson was defiant about the fact that NBCUSA churches "never asked for reparations", said Jackson. "They built their own churches with their own hands and their own money". For Jackson, this was a matter of Black economic principle. "We must learn how to organize our capital, harness our earnings and set them to work for us", he insisted (Shnayerson 1970).

These comments by Jackson in 1970 came on the heels of two significant expressions of reparations demands during the late-1960s by Black religious leaders. Firstly, in the months prior to King's 1968 assassination he had begun placing a stronger emphasis on poverty and was organizing a national Poor People's Campaign in response to American economic inequities. The Campaign's strategic center was a mass protest gathering planned for the National Mall in Washington accompanied by an ongoing "Tent City" occupation of the Mall, as well as a set of reparations-like demands King referred to as an "Economic Bill of Rights". Those demands included: USD 30 billion targeted at fighting poverty; guaranteed full employment and income; and the construction of 500,000 affordable homes each year. King understood the Campaign to be an existential fight for American structural transformation, stating:

We would go to Washington and demand to be heard, and we would stay until America responded. If this meant forcible repression of our movement, we would confront it, for we have done this before. If it meant scorn or ridicule, we embrace it, for that is what America's poor now receive. If it meant jail, we accepted it willingly, for the millions of poor were already imprisoned by exploitation and discrimination (King 2001, p. 347).

King had begun laying the foundations for his economic rights and restructuring agenda several years earlier through promotions of what he referred to as the "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged". Outlining this Bill of Rights in speeches he made at the 1964 Democratic and Republican conventions and in his 1964 book *Why We Can't Wait*, King's proposed Bill of Rights called for governmental expenditures of USD 50 billion over ten years on educational, housing, and employment assistance for impoverished Americans earning less than USD 3000 annually (irrespective of race) and for families making less than USD 3000 annually to "receive direct payment to reach \$3000". King justified these measures by highlighting the nation's systematic social and economic oppression of African Americans:

Certainly the Negro has been deprived. Few people considered the fact that, in addition to being enslaved for two centuries, the Negro was, during all these years, robbed of the wages of his toil. No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America down through the centuries ... The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice

of common law. Such measures would certainly be less expensive than any computation based on two centuries of unpaid wages and accumulated interest (King 1964).

King was assassinated before he could fully implement his hoped-for mobilization around this economic rights agenda, including the envisioned 1968 mass protest gathering on the National Mall—and, in any event, he never received nearly the support for an economic rights agenda that had been mobilized around a civil rights agenda. Nevertheless, a few weeks after King's death, Ralph Abernathy, Coretta Scott King, Jesse Jackson, and other leaders proceeded to Washington with several thousand activists, where they camped in a tent city on the National Mall for six weeks. Although this collective protest failed to achieve the hoped-for levels of public attention or legislative and programmatic action, it served as a powerful social and theological critique of systemic Black poverty.

While King's statements of economic rights could be classified as somewhat veiled reparations demands, a more explicit call for reparations, "The Black Manifesto", was issued in 1969 at a national Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC) in Detroit facilitated primarily by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO). The Manifesto demanded USD 500 million from the American power structure toward the establishing of the following: (1) a Southern land bank in support of Black farmers; (2) four major Black publishing houses; (3) four Black television networks; (4) a research skills center for research on Black life; (5) a Black training center for teaching skills needed in communications fields; and (6) structures for community organizing initiatives among welfare recipients. The Manifesto, composed in large part by former Student Nonviolent Coordinator Conference executive James Forman, was presented and approved by delegates at the Detroit conference, including by religious leaders affiliated with IFCO and by a collaborating organization the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC). A few days after the Detroit conference, Forman (who served as BEDC field director) attended the Sunday morning worship service at New York City's historic Riverside Church where he marched to the front of the sanctuary and interrupted service with a prophetic declaration of the Manifesto's demands. Although Forman was subsequently invited to present the Manifesto at a board meeting of the National Council of Churches, the Manifesto received very little moral support nationally from White or Black churches, and the only financial resources it secured was a USD 300,000 contribution in 1969 from the United Methodist Church (Wilmore 1986, pp. 202–8).

While support for reparations may have been in short supply in the U.S. within Christian circles, strong support for the idea of reparations has been a feature of Black religious nationalist groups such as the Nation of Islam (NOI) since at least the early-1960s. In 1961, the NOI newspaper "Muhammad Speaks" initiated a section called "What the Muslims Want and What the Muslims Believe" containing among its principles the following:

We want our people in America whose parents or grandparents were descendants from slaves, to be allowed to establish a separate state or territory of their own—either on this continent or elsewhere. We believe that our former slave masters are obligated to provide such land and that the area must be fertile and mineral rich. We believe that our former slave masters are obligated to maintain and supply our needs in this separate territory for the next 20 to 25 years—until we are able to produce and supply our own needs (Muhammad 2001).

This principle ran continuously in the publication and subsequently was included in its successor publication "The Final Call". NOI spokesman Malcolm X brought further detail to NOI thinking about reparations. In a 1963 speech at Michigan State University, Malcolm stated:

The greatest contribution to this country was that which was contributed by the Black man . . . Now, when you see this, and then you stop and consider the wages that were kept back from millions of Black people, not for one year but for 310 years, you'll see how this country got so rich so fast. And what made the

economy as strong as it is today. And all that . . . slave labor that was amassed in unpaid wages, is due someone today ([Malcolm X 1963](#)).

In addition to statements on the principle of reparations, one branch of the original NOI called “The Lost-Found Nation of Islam” which was launched in 1977 by longstanding NOI follower Sillis Muhammad collaborated in 1994 with a group called Caucasians United for Reparations and Emancipation (CURE) in petitioning the United Nations (UN) for its support of reparations for African Americans. The petition, submitted simultaneously to the World Court in The Hague, Netherlands, was formally accepted and recorded by the UN and “forwarded to the offending government”, the United States ([Koss 1993](#)). Nevertheless, it received no further action.

Since Louis Farrakhan began in the late-1970s after the death of Elijah Muhammad to reestablish NOI’s original mission, he has endeavored to affirm and advance Elijah Muhammad’s teachings, including earlier NOI frameworks related to reparations. Farrakhan has been systematic in his itemizations of Black social injuries tracing to enslavement and has placed a continuous emphasis on provision of millions of acres of land in the U.S. or elsewhere as payment for the sufferings and injustices visited upon Black people. The separatist and emigrationist aspects of Black religious nationalists extending back to Bishop Turner have been readily evident, with Farrakhan updating the nation building purposes of an independent Black land base to include serving as spaces of reprieve and restoration for hundreds of thousands of incarcerated African Americans. By the late-1980s, Farrakhan was publicly demanding that “the United States and governments in Africa should be pressured to create a ‘fertile, mineral-rich’ country to which Black prisoners in U.S. jails could emigrate” ([Edsall and Ifill 1989](#)). In the early-2000s, he was making these same demands and directing them at President George W. Bush. “Just send [Black prisoners] to the Nation of Islam and we’ll make them better”, he said. “Let them do their time in Africa”. Farrakhan articulated hopes that Africa could be persuaded “to set aside some territory ... that’s fertile and mineral rich, with an outlet to the sea”, while indicating the land should be paid for by the U.S. government through monies otherwise spent incarcerating African Americans and monies owed African Americans for hundreds of years of mistreatment ([UPI 1989](#)).

Farrakhan has also been consistent in extending accountability for African American suffering, to include other sectors and other nations. In a 2014 speech in Antigua, Farrakhan stated:

There was something in the Catholic Church called the papal bulls . . . a type of letter issued . . . by the pope. The pope issued a papal bull granting Portugal and Spain full and free permission to invade, search out and capture unbelievers and enemies of Christ wherever they may be and reduce their persons into perpetual slavery . . . So when we are asking for reparations, we can’t leave the church out. You can’t leave the pope out, nor can you leave European countries out ([Wilkinson 2014](#)).

Farrakhan became a central figure in reparations discussions by the 1990s, as illustrated in part by his invitation from ABC news anchor Sam Donaldson to discuss reparations on a 1990 episode of Donaldson’s popular news show “Prime Time Live”. Although Donaldson’s interest seemed to be in refuting Black claims to reparations, Farrakhan was able nonetheless to outline his case for reparations before a national television audience ([Goodman 1990](#)). Farrakhan’s profile expanded further after his massive Million Man March in 1995, as did his influence and reach as a reparations spokesman.

A 2002 “Millions for Reparations” demonstration and protest in Washington, DC provided another strategic platform for Farrakhan’s reparations advocacy. The two-day 16 and 17 August event included among its primary facilitators the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America (N’COBRA) and the National Black United Fund (the latter founded and chaired by Pentecostal pastor Herbert Daughtry). Farrakhan served as keynote speaker at the event’s 16 August gathering at the District’s People’s Congregational Church, attended by 1300 people, and spoke again from the platform at the 17 August

rally attended by thousands of persons on the National Mall (Aiyetoro 2003, p. 16). In 2003, Farrakhan hosted dozens of reparations advocates from across the U.S. for a series of strategy sessions he led on “operational unity” within the reparations movement. As a culmination of that organizing, Farrakhan delivered an address at the 2004 gathering of NOI’s “Saviour’s Day Convention” titled, “Reparations: What does America and Europe Owe? What does Allah (God) promise?” (Farrakhan n.d.). Farrakhan has continued to be a leading 21st century voice on reparations, through NOI platforms such as the annual Saviour’s Day convention and the *Final Call* newspaper, and via speaking engagements across the U.S., Caribbean, and Africa. As acknowledgement of Farrakhan’s leadership within the reparations movement, N’COBRA gave Farrakhan a Lifetime Achievement award at its 30th annual convention in 2019 (Capitol Research Center 2019).

3. From Reparations Ideals to Operationalization

N’COBRA’s founding in 1988 as a coalition of multiple organizations and leaders committed to reparations marked for some the emergence of the “modern-day reparations movement”, with this trajectory representing important divergences at points from reparations advocacy by Black religious leaders (Smith 2000; Taifa 2020). One of the distinctives ushered in by N’COBRA that became a defining feature of the more prominent reparations activism from that point forward was the progression beyond merely bold demands and expressive defiance to greater reliance on Black leadership cadres capable of leveraging politically strategic institutional and intellectual capital on behalf of the reparations cause. For example, the leadership pool on which N’COBRA drew in its founding and initial activism included prominent scholars such as Howard University political science chair and Jesse Jackson presidential campaign manager Ronald Walters; Columbia University’s Institute for Research in African-American Studies founding director Manning Marable; Cornell University’s Africana Studies department founding chair James Turner; renowned poet Sonia Sanchez; Black elected officials such as Michigan State Senator Bill Owens; and prominent activists such as Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale and Republic of New Afrika co-founder Imari Obadele (who also was the co-founder of N’COBRA). Across its 35-year history, N’COBRA has served as one of the largest sources of information and research on reparations and of organizational backing for reparations advocacy on Capitol Hill. That would include support for House Resolution 40, the reparations bill introduced in 1989 by Michigan congressman John Conyers and reintroduced every year thereafter until Conyers retired from Congress in 2017—and then subsequently sponsored by Texas congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee (N’COBRA n.d.).

This contrast between expressive and instrumental reparations advocacy was evident at the 2002 Millions for Reparations Demonstration and Protest in Washington, DC, with presentations by religious leaders such as Farrakhan and Daughtry tilting more toward an emphasis on Black consciousness-raising and social healing while political officials such as Conyers outlined legislative proposals. Farrakhan, for example, although consistent in his calls for land payments to descendants of enslaved Africans, also gave considerable attention to the need for Black cultural and psychic repair. “We need payment for the destruction of our minds”, he stated, and for the “robbery of our language, our culture, our history, our religion, our God, our self dignity, our self worth”. Similarly, while Daughtry stressed the need for a Marshall Plan to rebuild cities and to address racial inequities in educational and health care opportunities, he strongly emphasized the need to define “winning” in terms of “people’s consciousness being raised” and also by putting “the enemy on the defensive . . . with a moral argument”.

Conyers, however, defined the reparations battle and indicators of reparations progress more in terms of immediate public redress. Addressing the audience as “leaders of the effort for reparations now”, he insisted reparations would not be achieved simply by “praying” (which he regarded as an important “stimulus to action). Instead, said Conyers, we “get reparations now by contacting every single member of the House of Representatives . . . and every single member of the United States Senate” in order “to influence, and

educate, and motivate them to step up to the plate for our long neglected . . . cause—reparations for every one of the descendants of African Americans whose predecessors were held in bondage”. He also led the audience in a pledge to contact their congressional representative and respective senators before the end of the month to determine where those elected officials stood on the “simple” and “modest” H.R. 40 proposal to facilitate “the first detailed, exhaustive study of reparations that has ever been held in the United States Congress”. Congressional support for H.R. 40 remains slow-going, although the bill made it out of committee in the House for the first time in 2021 and currently has more than 200 House co-sponsors. Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) introduced a companion bill in 2019 in the U.S. Senate S. 1083 that has faced a far steeper climb than the House bill. Nevertheless, the congressional reparations bills have catalyzed state and local reparations initiatives alongside strong support networks for the federal bills, with key support from denominations and ecumenical groups such as the National Council of Churches, the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, the Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ (Banks 2021; Holznagel 2022; National Council of Churches n.d.; Taifa 2020).

Commitments to the kind of instrumentalized reparations frameworks and targets evidenced by Conyers and by other reparations-related legislative activism have been increasingly characteristic of reparations advocacy throughout the first quarter of the 21st century. This aligns with contemporary concerns within the field of public policy with ensuring public policymaking that produces “measurable and positive results” and that is able to “define a problem”, “strategize solutions”, “anticipate the social response”, and consider “benefits and costs” (Pepperdine University 2020). The H.R. 40 initiative certainly has tried to avoid overreach and to set achievable goals for advancing the reparations cause—as have several other contemporary reparations initiatives whose advocacy has been targeted at institutional or local municipal contexts.

With respect to institutional targets, there have been recent and widely publicized examples of impactful reparations initiatives targeting institutions specifically within the realm of higher education, including initiatives at Georgetown University, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Virginia Theological Seminary. Georgetown’s movement toward reparations began in earnest in 2014 after a student newspaper published findings pertaining to Georgetown’s previous ownership of hundreds of enslaved Africans who through their labor and the sale of several hundred of these persons generated significant portions of the college’s operating revenues at the time. The publicizing of that history prompted the university’s president to establish a working group in 2015 on “Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation” which produced a report and recommendations. The recommendations included the establishment of a USD 100 million fund, half of which was to be used toward racial reconciliation activities, a quarter in support of educational grants and scholarships for the descendants of the university’s formerly enslaved persons, and the rest toward emergency health services for descendants as well as for ancestry research. A foundation has been established by the university to administer this reparatory programming (Merelli 2021; Murawski 2022).

Reparations initiatives proceeded along similar lines at Princeton Theological and Virginia Theological, two of the wealthiest freestanding seminaries in the U.S. After conducting studies of their respective institutions’ connections with slavery, and though not finding evidence in either instance that their institution owned slaves, both seminaries launched programs in 2019 designed to disburse scholarships to descendants of enslaved Africans. Virginia Theological’s reparatory program was endowed at USD 1.7 million and by mid-2021 had provided modest scholarship payments to 15 descendants of Black persons who labored on its campus during slavery and segregation eras. Princeton Theological allocated USD 27.8 million to endow a program costing USD 1 million per year that resources Black scholarships, Black campus programming, and Black faculty hiring (Redden 2021; Kaur 2019). Although hailed by some as important marks of progress, others (including some within these institutions) concluded these responses did not carry nearly far enough toward sought-after repairs. In the case of Princeton Theological, for

example, several Black student leaders at the seminary calculated “at least 15 percent of the seminary’s \$986 million endowment should be set aside for reparations”, requiring from the seminary more than five times the amount it had approved (Kaur 2019).

Black religious leaders also have been at the forefront of state and local reparations initiatives, including as part of a turn-of-the-century campaign initiated in Tulsa, Oklahoma for reparations in response to the 1921 massacre and mass destruction within its Black Wall Street neighborhood. A commission was formed in the late-1990s in Tulsa to document the 1921 atrocities and to recommend formal responses, and a Tulsa Reparations Coalition was organized in 2001 committed to pursuing litigation that could achieve reparations in response to injustices visited upon Tulsa’s Black population. Lawsuits have proceeded into the present and the process has been actively supported by Black faith leaders, including high-profile weekly protests led by the current pastor of Tulsa’s Mt. Vernon AME Church, whose building singularly survived the fiery destruction of the Black Wall Street neighborhood (Heath 2020).

In 2019, Evanston, Illinois formally committed to reparations for slavery, with the city allocating USD 10 million over ten years. Four percent of that is to be applied toward housing assistance for Black residents while decisions are still being made about the use to which the other 96 percent of the reparations monies will be put. Black faith leaders were a constituent part of the strong faith lobby that helped achieve Evanston’s commitment to reparations (Banks 2021). In 2020, the Asheville, North Carolina City Council approved the creation of a Community Reparations Commission that will seek to respond to decades of racial discrimination in housing, education, health, economic development, and criminal justice (Miller 2022). Nevertheless, despite the Council’s good intentions, pitfalls in its implementation became immediately evident as the Black Ministerial Alliance objected to being bypassed by the Council in favor of a White downtown church in the facilitation of an initial affordable housing project emanating from the reparations proposal (Horak 2020).

Nonetheless, while these various examples illustrate that an emphasis on achievable operational metrics and mechanics may result in more rapid and realizable reparations outcomes, the narrowing of frameworks and targets may not align well with key benchmarks within the reparations movement. With respect to maintaining integrity in the economic negotiations of reparations for example, two leading reparations scholars William Darity, Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen set the White-Black wealth differential at roughly USD 350,000 per person and the amount of a reparations package for Black Americans at USD 14 trillion in total. Consequently, say Darity and Mullen, state, local, or institutional-sector reparations initiatives are piecemeal and work against national-level approaches that alone possess the financial capacities required for a fair and just reparations metrics (Darity and Mullen 2020).

Nevertheless, scaled approaches have helped advance the reparations movement within the U.S., and in ways that have made clearer the interrelatedness between reparations achievability and acceptability.

4. Unexpected Allies and Expansion Indicators

As the reparations issue has become more mainstreamed with respect to its messaging and its messengers, support for reparations has emerged also from very surprising sources. A stinging critique of American church positioning on race and reparations was delivered through a 2019 book whose authors declared: “The church in America is not and never has been an innocent bystander to White supremacy” but, rather, has “been present—as friend and foe—every step of the way”. The authors defined White supremacy as “a multigenerational campaign of cultural theft, in which the identities, agency, and prosperity of African Americans are systematically stolen and given to others”. They emphasized Christianity’s “historic ethic of culpability and restitution . . . that teaches . . . when you take something that does not belong to you, love requires you to return it”. Moreover, they continued, “even when not culpable for a theft, the Christian still has the obligation to restore what was lost” (Kwon and Thompson 2021). This is a book whose theological

premises are well-founded and biblically centered and whose authors (Duke Kwon and Gregory Thompson) are highly respected church leaders. Interestingly, both authors are aligned with one of the more conservative evangelical denominations in the U.S., the Presbyterian Church of America which formed partly out of opposition to the Civil Rights Movement (Ward 2021).

Another persuasive evangelical validation of slavery reparations was issued in a 2019 publication by theologian Thabiti Anyabwile, an influential evangelical scholar and pastor and well-known critic of Black Liberation Theology (Anyabwile 2007). In an essay titled, “Reparations Are Biblical”, Thabiti cites scriptural examples of ancient rulers who through divine providence taxed contemporary “generations of people who committed no crime” in order to underwrite social repairs directed at current descendants of the injured population “who did not suffer the original crime”. What Thabiti deduces from these biblical examples is: “If God, who is just and only does justice, has acted in this way then it cannot be unjust for nation-states to voluntarily repay its own citizens for crimes suffered at its hands—no matter when the crimes occurred” (Anyabwile 2019). This directly challenges social and religious conservatives’ common criticism of the idea of collective culpability for slavery and past racial injuries.

The prominent evangelical publication *Christianity Today* also drew attention to reparations through an article detailing support for reparations by theologians and biblical scholars across hundreds of years. As the essay’s author theologian David Lincicum observes, theological “debates over compensating a group of people for past injuries or abuses date back to at least the early centuries of the common era [and have] roots in the Hebrew Bible and in early Christian biblical interpretation”. Lincicum affirms the validity of slavery reparations as a matter of concern for contemporary Christians rooted in a sense of biblical and theological orthodoxy and necessity, stating that the logic infusing debates over interpretations of these scripture passages “strikingly anticipates the case for reparations in the US today” (Lincicum 2022).

While these examples represent surprising support from a sector of American Christianity that has been historically disinclined toward embracing Black racial justice pursuits, strong levels of American resistance or apathy toward slavery reparations persist nonetheless—and especially among sectors of White social and religious conservatives. One Southern Baptist clergyman’s critique of reparations stances by conservative Christians points to what he calls an “anti-anti-racism evangelical complex” operative within his denomination and within other evangelical ecclesial groups. In illustrating the disdain for reparations advocacy among this segment, he references a Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor’s characterization of pro-reparations positions by evangelicals and other Christians as “poisonous, anti-gospel rhetoric” that represents a capitulation to broader cultural influences (Bumgardner 2021).

While evangelical support for reparations should not be overblown (by those welcoming or eschewing it), it is suggestive of expanding support for reparations within the U.S., including from places not often considered to be a natural base of such support. Recent polling data from YouGov does confirm a growing receptivity toward reparations among both White and Black persons, with White support for the idea of reparatory cash payments increasing from six percent in 2014 to 28 percent in 2021 and Black support increasing from 59 percent to 86 during that timeframe. The studies also showed linkages in perceptions of acceptability and achievability of reparations (at least from the perspective of White respondents) who expressed much stronger preferences for non-cash reparatory measures than for cash payments, with 52 percent supporting a memorial, 47 percent supporting a memorial on the National Mall, and 39 percent supporting an official apology (Moore 2014; Reichelmann and Hunt 2021; UMass Amherst/WCVB 2021). Widely publicized cases of egregious racial injustice in recent years including police killings of unarmed Black persons such as Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd likely contributed to the greater receptivity to reparations in principle.

Nonetheless, the low level of White support for reparatory cash payments (a core demand within the reparations movement) is indicative of the distance yet to travel toward a more systematic embrace of reparations. A commonly cited reason for White resistance to financial reparations has been “the difficulty of determining the monetary value of the impact of slavery” (Reichelmann and Hunt 2021). Yet extensive itemizations of the enormity of slavery’s financial impact on Black people in fact have been made, with some calculations significantly exceeding even Darity and Mullen’s USD 14 trillion figure. For example, figures cited in Bloomberg’s “The Pay Check” podcast place slavery’s financial loss and disadvantage to African Americans at USD 65 trillion (in today’s dollars), which includes USD 42 trillion White people gained from the wealth generated from slavery, USD 20 trillion in wages Black people lost through their enslavement, and USD 3 trillion Black people were denied by the government’s broken promise of land allocations to the formerly enslaved (Saraiva 2021). Even where White people may have acknowledged some degree of slavery’s financial legacy, it has not necessarily overridden their resistance to financial reparations, especially where they have perceived of themselves as financially vulnerable. Survey data by Reichelmann and Hunt show, for example, that “white women . . . are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to oppose financial payments, as are respondents with lower levels of education” (Reichelmann and Hunt 2022, p. 277). In these instances, White respondents appear to signal the priority placed on ensuring their individual and collective financial self-interest, including against competition from government-assisted Black economic strivings.

Taking all these factors into account, it remains to be seen how far and in what directions support by Americans for reparations will extend. But data on expansions of White support and examples of pro-reparations advocacy from within conservative White religious sectors represent modest but favorable indicators of potential scale and scope.

5. Concluding Thoughts

During the last century and a half, there has been notable (though slow and sporadic) movement within the U.S. on possibilities for slavery reparations—evolving from a marginal proposition to one receiving greater consideration and support within mainstream circles. Many factors undoubtedly have contributed to the growing acceptability of slavery reparations, including expanded Black social influence and empowerment in general. Nonetheless, evidence outlined here suggests a link between growth in public acceptability of reparations and pragmatic framings of reparations goals and objectives.

The price of achievability, however, may be a surrendering of ground with respect to comprehensiveness of demands. There are varying perspectives as to whether this is a worthwhile tradeoff but, as shown here, the momentum within the reparations movement and among Black religious advocates in particular appears to be toward pursuits of broader support and achievable outcomes despite the compromises that may entail.

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